Industry Gives Pledge to Knock Out Anonymity of 'Hate' Telephone Calls

By Robert C. Albright
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A Senate subcommittee investigating the rising flood of anonymous, recorded "hate" messages received an industry pledge yesterday to knock out the anonymity of such telephone calls.

But Sen. John O. Pastore (D-R.I.) told industry and government witnesses that voluntary corrective action might not be enough.

He directed E. William Henry, Chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, to study and report back on two bills proposing Federal action to pin down the authorship of the abusive calls.

Pastore, chairman of the Commerce Subcommittee on Communications, staged a demonstration of how "Let Freedom Ring," right-wing sponsor of many of the anonymous phone calls does its work.

A telephone company technician dialed "Let Freedom Ring" numbers in Baltimore and Southern Pines, N.C. The recorded messages poured back charges of Communist direction of the civil rights movement and efforts to "downgrade" the police.

Henry cited steps already taken by the American Telephone and Telegraph Co. to require the originators of such calls and users of the automatic devices to identify themselves.

But he warned the Subcommittee of an "unwelcome cloud on the horizon," a new automatic device that cannot only call numbers, deliver a message, but can call back in case of a hang-up.

He said the FCC will "resourcefully" deal with the problem if the telephone companies fail to do so.

Said Henry: "The device may prevent the called party from using his telephone again until the message is completed, even if he hangs up in the middle . . .

"It does not stretch the imagination very far to envision the political pitchman invading our homes with his unsolicited messages. We might even be faced with an unwelcome intruder whom we couldn't turn off, talk back to or even identify."

Sen. Pastore, backed up by Sens. Gale W. McGee (D-Wyo.) and Vance Hartke (D-Ind.) emphasized throughout the hearings that they have no idea of censoring the content of the messages, legislatively or otherwise. They suggested that identification of the tapes and the subscriber who carries them on his telephone will discourage the practice.

Pastore said he is determined to check the flood of obscene phone calls as well, by one means or another. He said this may require amendment of the criminal statutes.

Gordon N. Thayer, Vice President of AT&T for Bell System Operating Companies, said the phone system is taking steps to deal with the problem. He urged the subcommittee to "wait awhile" before reporting legislation.

Paul Rogers, of the National Association of Railroad and Utility Commissioners, also urged the Senators to hold up action to give state regulatory bodies a chance to cope with the problem. However, Charles H. Tuttle, of the Nattional Council of the Churches of Christ, suggested Congress has waited long enough.